



THE BALTIMORE SUN

COMMENTARY

SUNDAY June 21, 2015

Fathers, sons and baseball

BY WILLIAM C. KASHATUS

“Hey Dad, wanna have a catch?”

I heard those words for the first time in the summer of 2000 when my 4-year-old son, Peter, grabbed the battered leather glove I used as a child and asked me to throw a baseball with him.

I was around the same age when I fell in love with the game. It was 1964 and my hometown Philadelphia Phillies looked as if they would clinch their first National League pennant since 1950. Up by 6 1/2 games with 12 left to play, the Phillies dropped 10 in a row, gift-wrapping the flag for the St. Louis Cardinals. I was devastated.

To cheer me up, my father told me, “Wait till next year!” So I kept waiting and waiting. As it turned out, I had to wait 16 years for the Phillies to capture another pennant. It was the beginning of a love-hate relationship with the game.

Baseball is an important part of my life. Its intellectual challenge, seasonal rhythms and rich history have always captivated me. The game inspired an ongoing conversation with my father, especially during my adolescence when it seemed like we had absolutely nothing to talk about.

Even after I graduated from college, when the sport in its own harsh, but subtle way told me that it had no use for me anymore as a player, I found a way to

continue my passion as a writer and a coach. That’s when baseball became a meaningful form of self-expression and the primary vehicle through which I taught youngsters such life-lessons as fair play, perseverance and teamwork.

At the same time, baseball created a fair share of conflict in my life. When I played the game I was a sore loser, much to the dismay of my mother, who simply couldn’t understand what all the fuss was about. The storm clouds didn’t clear much when I was a young high school coach either.

I took certain things personally, like players who didn’t respect the game, fathers complaining about their sons’ lack of playing time and mothers hassling me about my “tough-love” disciplinary approach.

My wife, a non-athlete, was never able to understand the deep and abiding feelings I possess for the game. She was relieved when I left high school teaching and coaching for graduate school and a part-time job as an assistant college coach. It was easier for her when I wasn’t the head of a program.

Predictably, when Peter, at age 4, showed an interest in baseball, she secured a written promise that I wouldn’t impose my passion on him.

I didn’t have to.

Peter also fell hard and fast for baseball. I simply funded the Phillies’ ticket and spirit-wear departments and agreed to

coach just about every one of his teams from Little League through American Legion. The arrangement worked well for nearly a decade.

But when he was 16, we began to have our differences. So we agreed to end our association as coach and player to preserve our relationship as father and son. It was painful for me to let go of the game, tougher still to let go of my son.

Like me, Peter is a catcher, a selfless position that places team success above personal achievement and sportsmanship above ego. Unlike me, my son keeps his emotions in check and weighs his words carefully.

When he went on to play for other teams whose coaches and players cared more about the ego gratification of winning and personal achievement, Peter was able to contribute to those teams without compromising his own integrity.

I’m proud that my son has become his own man — and a much better ballplayer than I ever was.

I’ll miss him dearly when he leaves home for college in the fall. But maybe, if I’m lucky, he’ll return to me one summer evening and ask to play catch, just as he did when he was 4.

William C. Kashatus is author of “Jackie & Campy: The Untold Story of Their Rocky Relationship and Breaking Baseball’s Color Line” (University of Nebraska Press). His email is bill@historylive.net.